

Strengthening Identification with the Team in Virtual Teams: The Leaders' Perspective

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Abstract

The number of virtual teams is increasing in today's workplaces. In virtual teams, the members can have different cultural backgrounds, they often work in different countries and are professionals in their own fields. In addition, as such diverse and dispersed teams communicate mainly through communication technology this raises the challenge for the team leader of how to unify the team and get the members to identify themselves with the team. This qualitative study focuses on four virtual team leaders and their attempts to strengthen the team members' identification with the team through computer-mediated communication. The results show four different tactics employed in enhancing identification with the team: catering for the individual, giving positive feedback, bringing out common goals and workings and talking up the team activities and face-to-face meetings. The roles of organizational change and technology in identification with virtual teams are also discussed.

Key words: communication technology, computer-mediated communication, identification, team identity, team leader, virtual team

Introduction

Teams that consist of team members working in different regions, countries and continents, face challenges in coordinating their communication and finding a cohesive and encouraging atmosphere within the team. It is especially the team leaders who have to rise to these challenges as they are responsible for managing the team effectively. Virtual teams are becoming increasingly common as organizations globalize and invest in new communication technologies that enable virtual collaboration (Godar and Ferris 2004; Jackson 1999; Townsend et al. 1998). They may include members who have no previous experience of virtual work, or members who come from different cultures and organizational backgrounds. Creating a team identity in such a diverse group through computer-mediated communication takes time and effort, but is an important factor in team leading processes.

Identification is a critical variable in work relationships. It can be defined as "the process in which an individual comes to see an object (e.g. an individual, group, organization) as being definitive of oneself and forms a psychological connection with that object" (Connaughton and Daly 2004a). The definition is similar to the concept of organizational commitment, which has also been widely studied in organizational literature (see e.g. Meyer and Herscovitch 2001 for a review). It has been argued that these two constructs are distinct though interrelated concepts and the focus should not necessarily be on separating or integrating the terms, but on understanding the relationships between them (Cheney and

Tompkins 1987). However, in this article I use the term identification, since it can be traced back to Kenneth Burke and his study of the rhetoric of identification (Burke 1950), whereas the concept of commitment is rooted more in the idea of a psychological contract, a pledge or a “binding”. Seen in this context, identification is a communicative process, where individuals produce their identity through the conversation of shared interests (Cheney and Tompkins 1987). This definition differs from the often cited social identity theory (Tajfel 1974) and its applications (see e.g. Mael and Ashforth 1995), which tend to suggest that identification may occur without interaction. However, I echo Scott, Corman and Cheney’s (1998) views that “actual, hypothesized, or even retrospectively examined interaction” is essential to the development of identification. The stories we tell of ourselves in interaction with others are the essence of identification, though the conversations may take place when others are “present” only in symbolic form (Scott et al. 1998).

In virtual teams, the communicative nature of identification means that team identity is created in computer-mediated interaction, as the members do not have the opportunity to see each other often face-to-face. The computer-mediated environment has been seen to play different kinds of roles when it comes to team identity issues. According to a study conducted by Wiesenfeld et al. (1998), the cues that lead to identification in traditional organizational contexts may not be as apparent in virtual contexts, due in part to the reduced possibilities of face-to-face interaction. This raises the challenge to the team leader of how to get the team members to identify themselves with the team through computer-mediated channels. Chidambaram and Bostrom (1997) have presented another approach. They state that it is particularly the characteristics of the communication technology, such as anonymity, process structuring and electronic memory, which may in fact facilitate team members’ identification with the team. The structures of the technology offer a record of the team’s past accomplishments and provide an arena for open dialogue within the team. Therefore, communication technology may enhance participation among team members and strengthen identification with the team. A third perspective, presented by Lea and Spears (1992), a model called Social identification/deindividuation, and often referred to by the acronym SIDE-model, stresses the salience of the social and individual identities people have when communicating through technology. It is not the technology and its characteristics per se that foster or weaken one’s identification with a group, but it is the set of social identities the participants bring to the computer-mediated environment. If a team member has a strong team identity, the characteristics of the technology, such as visual anonymity, may further enhance team identity through de-individuating effects. De-individuation is a cognitive state, which “leads to perceived reduction of intragroup differences and thereby further increases the salience of the group” (Lea and Spears 1992, p. 330). However, a reversed effect is also possible under conditions of low team salience, when the de-individuating effects of computer-mediated communication may enhance one’s sense of individualism and reduce the importance of the team (Lea and Spears 1992).

This discussion of the characteristics of technology and the possibilities of virtual teams in constructing team identity through computer-mediated communication leaves open an important issue, namely the role of team leaders in fostering their members’ identification with a virtual team. Overall, the team leaders are eventually responsible for the effective performance of their teams. Whether or not the technology itself can help the team members

to identify more strongly with the team and its tasks, the team leaders have an important role in strengthening team members' identification with the team and guiding the team towards the common goals. The research question in this article is *how virtual team leaders attempt to strengthen their team members' identification with the team through computer-mediated communication*.

Team Leading and Identification Strategies

Despite the extensive literature on organizational leadership and management practices, virtual team leadership and leading people from afar has remained an underinvestigated area. Studies have considered virtual team management in terms of multiple leadership roles (Kayworth and Leidner 2002) and the impact of team characteristics on virtual team leading (Bell and Kozlowski 2002), but virtual team leaders' communication practices and identification strategies have not been widely studied.

Recent studies have investigated leadership characteristics as factors relating to employees' identification. It has been suggested that more "female" leadership qualities, such as nurturing, developing relational aspects, and focusing on the emotional contexts of the subordinates, would enhance employees' identification with the organization (McColl-Kennedy and Anderson 2005, p. 124). Studies have also shown the relationship between employees' organizational identification and perceived leadership style, particularly the transformational leadership (Kark et al. 2003; Epitropaki and Martin 2005). As Epitropaki and Martin (2005, p. 583) state, it is the characteristics of transformational leading style, such as empowerment and trust building, which "are likely to create for organizational members the experience of being taken seriously, being listened and valued, which in turn can potentially enhance employees' positive affect and cognition towards the organizational identity." Furthermore, work-based social support and a participative management style have been shown to relate to organizational identification in virtual work settings (Wiesenfeld et al. 2001).

Studies considering leadership and member identification often discuss the relationship from the perspective of social identity theory (see e.g. Hogg and Terry 2000; Ellemers et al. 2004), and attribute the emergence of leadership to perceived prototypicality or social attraction rather than specific behavioral styles or interpersonal relationships the leaders develop with their team members. For example, it is proposed that if the team members perceive themselves to have a common identity with the leader, this helps the leader to mobilize the members toward collective goals. The experience of a shared identity develops from the perception of the leader as an in-group rather than an out-group member (Ellemers et al. 2004).

However, identification can be seen also as rhetorical action. In this context, it is possible to assume that team leaders' interpersonal relationships and communication with their subordinates are related to team members' identification with the team (see, e.g. Burke 1950; Cheney 1983; Connaughton and Daly 2004a). Leadership is in many ways symbolic action. It is not only what the team leader says, it is also a matter of how s/he says it, to whom and when. It is about how the leader carries out the daily routines, with whom s/he has the lunch and how s/he decorates the office. It is not the specific behaviour, but the

positive (or negative) symbolic value that these actions communicate to team members. (Connaughton and Daly 2004b.) Therefore, the symbols the leaders share with their team members may be used to facilitate members' identification with the team. As the leaders communicate with their team members, they share the values, goals and information of their team in the form of guidelines for collective action. Members may then accept this persuasion by adopting the team's interests and identifying with the team (Cheney 1983).

Cheney (1983) has synthesized many of Burke's (1950) statements on identification and used them to analyze the role of identification strategies in corporate house organs and periodicals. He found several different tactics of organizational identification that can be seen as subcategories of different identification strategies derived from Burke (1950). These tactics include (1) expression of concern for the individual, (2) recognition of individual contributions, (3) espousal of shared values, (4) advocacy of company benefits and activities, (5) praise from outsiders and (6) "testimonials" by employees. These categories all fall into Burke's common ground strategy, "where the rhetor equates himself or herself with others in an overt manner" (Cheney 1983, p. 148). Other Burkean identification strategies include identification through antithesis and the assumed or transcendent "we". Through corporate house organs, management can send persuasive messages, which create a sense of common ground and shared identity with the employees (Cheney 1983).

As virtual team members do not often see their leader face-to-face and the level of daily communication may remain low, the interaction between leader and team member plays an even more important role than in traditional settings. Therefore, the symbols the leader uses matter more in virtual teams than in face-to-face contexts. (Connaughton and Daly 2004b.) As seen in Cheney's (1983) exploration of organizational periodicals, creating symbols and meanings through persuasive communication may be an integral part of managerial communication. These kinds of persuasive identification strategies might be especially useful in virtual teams, where promoting identification with the team may be more complex than in traditional teams.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were four virtual team leaders from four international organizations. For the purposes of this article, I have labelled the teams in alphabetical order. The team leaders are labelled as "A1", "B1", "C1" and "D1", and the team members are labelled with the team letter and an incidental number.

At the time of the study, the teams had existed for between three months and two years. Leaders B, C and D had been leading their teams since they were established. Team A's leader came along four months after the team was formed. All the leaders were Finnish, three of them women and one man.

The number of members in each team varied from six to thirteen. However, the boundaries of the teams were often fluid. For example, team leader D was not sure if some of the people would actually become members of the team, as the team had recently been

constituted and it was still in the process of establishing itself. In addition, some of the team members from other teams worked only part-time for the team. Three of the teams were international and had English as their common language and one consisted of members from two cities in Finland. The dispersal of the team members varied a lot. In one team, only two members were from the same country, but in another team seven out of nine members worked in the same building. Two of the teams worked in the area of information technologies, one in communications and marketing, and one worked in the area of human resources. Communication technologies such as electronic mail, the telephone, an instant messaging system, discussion forums, videoconferencing and call conferencing, were the means by which most of the teams regularly communicated. The four teams and their characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Procedure

The majority of identification and commitment studies have relied on quantitative research methods using organizational commitment and organizational identification questionnaires (e.g. Mowday et al. 1979; Mael and Ashforth 1992). However, there is a considerable overlap between the commitment and identification scales, and several researchers (e.g. Barge and Schlueter 1988; Cheney and Tompkins 1987; Ashforth and Mael 1989) have pointed out that the operationalization of organizational identification and organizational commitment has not reached a consensus within the existing literature. Additionally, Barge and Schlueter (1988, p. 131) state, "the incorporation of communication strategies and tactics into organizational commitment measures has been noticeably absent". To avoid these problems, and to find out the communicative strategies used to increase identification, I turned to qualitative, naturalistic research methods (see e.g. Lincoln and Guba 1985), which give priority to the perspective of those being studied, rather than to the prior hypotheses of the researcher (Bryman 1989). Qualitative research seeks answers to questions that emphasize how social experience is created and given meaning, and stresses the analysis of processes, not the causal relationships between variables (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). In a qualitative study, investigation is carried out on a small number of cases in detail (Van Maanen et al. 1982).

As an interpretative approach, qualitative research gives no privilege to one single methodology over another (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). However, there are three main sources of data with which qualitative research is often associated: participant observation, interviews and examination of documents (Bryman 1989). These are similar to the sources of data used in this study as well. To best address the research question, I used three methods of data collection: interviewing, observation and the recording of actual communication.

First, I interviewed the four team leaders face-to-face in Finnish. The interviews were in-depth theme interviews held at the team leaders' workplaces, and they took from 72 to 97 min. The themes of the interviews dealt with the communication routines and habits of the team, virtual team leading practices, communication technologies used in the team, and team commitment and identification-related issues. I transcribed all the interviews verbatim and saved them to text-files. There were 152 pages of transcribed interviews.

Table 1. Team characteristics and data provided

	Team A	Team B	Team C	Team D
Team age (in the beginning of the study)	1 year ^a	2 years	1 year	3 months
Team size	8 + team leader	5–6 + team leader	11 + team leader	9–11 + team leader
Team locations	Three sites, 1 member at two of them and the remaining 7 members at one site	Four sites, 1 member at one, two members at others	Five sites, 1 member at four of them, and the remaining 8 members at one site	10 sites, 3 members at one of them, and the remaining 9 members in different sites
Team languages	Finnish only	English, Finnish & Swedish	English & Finnish	English, Finnish & Swedish
Gender distribution	3 female, 6 male	6 female, 1 male	9 female, 3 male	6 female, 6 male
Functional areas	Information Technology	Human Resources	Information Technology	Communication and Marketing
Communication technology used for team communication	E-mail, telephone, video conferences	E-mail, telephone, conference calls, instant messaging system (not with the whole team)	E-mail, telephone, conference calls, instant messaging system	E-mail, telephone, electronic discussion forum, video-conferences (not with the whole team)
Data provided	Team leader interview, 1 h 29 min; resulted in 39 pages of transcribed text Video conferences: 2 (in total 2 h 54 min; resulted in 49 pages of transcribed text)	Team leader interview, 1 h 37 min; resulted in 44 pages of transcribed text Conference calls: 3 (in total 2 h 5 min; resulted in 41 pages of transcribed text)	Team leader interview, 1 h 25 min; resulted in 35 pages of transcribed text Instant messaging discussions: 49	Team leader interview, 1 h 12 min; resulted in 34 pages of transcribed text Electronic discussion forum messages: 170

^aCurrent team leader joined 4 months later

Secondly, I wanted to observe the team leaders communicating through the technologies in their daily work. Therefore, I collected data by observing the communication the team leaders shared with the team members through video conferencing (team A) and conference calls (team B). I selected these technologies based on what the team leaders had said in the interviews about the technologies they often used for team communication. I participated in two videoconferences of team A and three conference calls of team B, and made notes on them. I also recorded both types of conference meetings (on audiotape only).

Thirdly, I recorded parts of the text-based communication of team leaders C and D. I asked each member of team C to select and submit for analysis some of the peer-to-peer discussions they were going to have with the rest of the team via the instant messaging system during the next month. The system enabled synchronous online discussion through personal computers. Seven members submitted messages, which varied in number from two to nineteen. In total, the data comprised 49 messages. Some of the discussions involved people outside the team as well, but most of the conversations involved team members and the leader.

With team D, I recorded the data from an electronic discussion forum, which was just being implemented for the use of the team. I had access to the discussion forum over the Internet during the first 11 months of its operation. I copied all the messages from the forum and saved them to text-files. The total number of messages gathered from the discussion forum was 170. The data provided in the analysis is presented in Table 1.

In selecting the communication technologies for observation and analysis, I was more interested in technologies that were designed to support group communication than technologies supporting interpersonal communication. I therefore preferred the technologies used by organizations primarily for team communication. I also considered it important that the technology chosen was either already a significant communication tool in the team or was becoming one (as was the case with team D). The conversations also needed to be easily accessed from outside the organizations or otherwise easily recorded by the informants. As e-mail, for example, is a communication tool that flashes enormous numbers of messages to its users daily, and as the team boundaries in virtual teams are not always clear, I thought it would be too laborious for participants to separate out the team's internal communication from other e-mail messages and to send them for investigation. These were the reasons why I excluded e-mail from the observation.

Analysis

The data gathered were analyzed qualitatively. I used an approach influenced by Miles and Huberman (1984) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). The latter base their analysis method exclusively on Glaser and Strauss (1967), but limit their scope on the data processing aspects instead of theory development, as in grounded theory (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 340). It should also be noted that the approaches of Miles and Huberman (1984) and Glaser and Strauss (1967) are more committed to the conventional paradigm of qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 339, 356), whereas the starting point of this study raises from the interpretative research paradigm.

The focus of analysis was on the messages the leaders shared with their team members. As I wanted to understand the situations and contexts which surrounded the virtual team leaders and their workings, I did not have any pre-existing theoretical framework to determine the course of the analysis. I therefore first carefully examined the data gathered from the interviews, observations, and recordings and uploaded the data to the ATLAS.ti©qualitative data analysis software. Then I started the coding by adding broad, simple categories and thus reduced the data to manageable portions. The unit of analysis varied from short sentences

to longer paragraphs. This phase of analysis was guided by the research question, and by my tacit knowledge of the data and theory. As Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 340–341) state: “ errors made as a result of using such knowledge are correctable on successive review, but incidents recognized tacitly, once eliminated, are virtually impossible to recapture.”

As the coding process continued, I constantly compared the new, emerging codes with the previous incidents in the textual data labelled with the same and different codes. Reading through the data extracts in their specific contexts, it was possible to discover the properties of each code. This guided the analysis further, enabling the creation of subcategories and the integration and redefinition of some of the former categories. With the data analysis software, I was also able to retrieve chunks of textual data that shared a common code and could aggregate instances and map their incidence (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, p. 28). The findings retrieved from this analysis process are presented in the next section in Table 2. The use of frequencies served more as a “way of seeing how robust” the categories were (Miles and Huberman 1984, p. 216) rather than indicating a statistical significance of the findings.

The next section presents the findings of this analysis with direct quotes and general descriptions of the virtual team leaders’ identification-promoting tactics. The examples provided illustrate the patterns through which virtual team leaders attempt to strengthen team members’ identification with the team and in what kinds of situations these identification-promoting tactics are used. I translated all the citations from the interviews and some of the citations from the observations in the Findings section into English. All the examples of actual messages and some of the observations in the Findings were originally written in English.

Findings

The tactics the team leaders used to foster virtual team members’ identification with the team fell into four categories: (1) catering for the individual, (2) giving positive feedback, (3) bringing out common goals and workings and (4) talking up the team activities and face-to-face meetings. These tactics were found both in the team leaders’ actual communication and in their interviews. The number of occurrences in each category is presented in Table 2. The technology also had an important role in identifying the team members with the team and in creating a shared team identity. In addition, the team leaders had to face the challenges that organizational changes brought to virtual team members’ identification with the team.

Catering for the individual

One tactic used by the virtual team leaders to foster their team members’ identification with the team was catering for the individual. Team leaders stressed the importance of the sovereignty of the team members and their right to different opinions in team decision-making. Moreover, the leaders saw their role in the team as important. Some of the leaders

Table 2. Team leaders' identification tactics

	Team A	Team B	Team C	Team D	Total number of occurrences
1. Catering for the individual	1 occurrence in interview, 6 in video-conferences	7 occurrences in interview, 4 in conference calls	11 occurrences in interview, 7 in instant messages (32% of the leader's messages)	1 occurrence in interview, 22 in discussion forum messages (34% of the leader's messages)	59
2. Giving positive feedback	No occurrences in interview, 7 in video-conferences	2 occurrences in interview, 3 in conference calls	No occurrences in interview, 3 in instant messages (14% of the leader's messages)	1 occurrence in interview, 3 in discussion forum messages (5% of the leader's messages)	19
3. Bringing out common goals and workings	2 occurrences in interview, none in videoconferences	11 occurrences in interviews, 3 in conference calls	4 occurrences in interview, none in instant messages (0% of the leader's messages)	3 occurrences in interview, 6 in discussion forum messages (9% of the leader's messages)	29
4. Talking up the team activities and face-to-face meetings	5 occurrences in interview, 3 in video-conferences	5 occurrences in interview, 2 in conference calls	1 occurrence in interview, 1 in instant messages (5% of the leader's messages)	3 occurrences in interview, 2 in discussion forum messages (3% of the leader's messages)	22

considered their role as that of supportive and nurturing coach, who is available when needed:

C1: the bulk of my work is to give support to my team members in their own work, I try to take part in their projects and some of their meetings when necessary, I offer advice, guidance, support, a shoulder to cry on (laughs), whatever, anything that is needed [—] and then I coach them, I'm their emotional anchor . . . I discuss a lot with them, they might come to ponder questions like what should I do in this situation, would this be a better approach than that and would it be worthwhile to do it like this, so there's a lot of discussion.

Catering for the individual was also present in the actual messages and observations the team leaders sent to their team members. In team D's discussion forum the team leader posted a message dealing with the strengths and weaknesses of the websites of the company, as team D was responsible for developing and updating the sites. The team leader asked for responses to this question from the team members and also reacted to them. This kind of discussion with a team member can be seen as catering for the individual (what follows is exactly as was written):

Strengths and weaknesses at [Company name] web sites?

12.03.2003 – 09:28:07

D1: Hello! We are doing a clearance to our management so that we could build a clear vision of our web development and our web strategy. One part of that is listing the strengths and weaknesses of our sites. So, give your opinion, what is good and what is not so good at our sites. Feel free to give your honest opinion. Few of my opinions: [—]

Re: Strengths and weaknesses at [Company name] web sites?

18.03.2003 – 14:36:34

D1: D3, You wrote at your first "weakness" that small decisions should be done in rep. countries. Can you give some examples of this? Where you feel that my decisions has been in conflict in yours? Where you feel that I have made decisions without asking from you (excluding customer satisfaction survey)? Or where you have made decisions which I have denied? I don't defend myself or disagree with you, don't get me wrong. This is very important question and it is important that we all trust each other. Anyone else feels the same?

Re: Strengths and weaknesses at [Company name] web sites?

24.03.2003 – 17:00:35

D1: You are right. It is very hard to "overcommunicate", we must inform each other as much as possible. It is about open communication which we have discussed earlier too. Sometimes the situations are so quick that there is no time to inform as soon as should. Hopefully this forum will help us to share information. Nice week for everybody!

The virtual team leaders also gave attention to the members during meetings held through videoconferences or conference calls. They mainly did this by asking questions or calling for feedback, but it was especially the cases where the team leader directed the question to each of the members in turn that seemed to create more personal and nurturing experience in the team. For example, in one of the Team B's call conferences, the leader wanted to hear first how things were at team members' local sites, before bringing up new issues:

B1: So, I thought we'd just start with a quick round of organizational issues if there's anything specific going on at the moment in your countries, just share it with us, briefly, and then we'll go (sic) to the normal agenda. . . . So, B4, would you like to start?

As the team members in virtual teams are geographically separated from each other and communicate mainly through computer-mediated channels, the team leaders considered catering for the individual crucial. Team leader C in particular stressed that even though some of the members were situated in different countries or even continents, all the members should be treated equally and the same information given to all of the team members.

C1: It makes particular demands on bosses about not to favor the people near you in any way, which happens so easily without any bad intentions, especially in the way things are communicated, and also those things that don't necessarily concern the people far away, if you have told everybody else, and they will hear afterwards, that this information has been passed on, then they will think why haven't I been told. You have to keep this in mind always when you inform [the team members] about anything.

Catering for the individual also meant that the team leaders were aware of the different time zones and working environments their remote team members were in. This can be seen from an instant messaging discussion team leader C had with her team member:

C3: good morning!

C1: good morning C3, it must be awfully late for you!

C3: it is midnight, I am just finishing up with my resume and now I am going to bed! [. . .]

The virtual team leaders saw it important that they were also available to the remote team members. In some of the teams the team leaders had agreed upon particular rules concerning how the team members should prioritize each other in answering e-mails coming inside the team, as this would reduce the feelings of loneliness and geographical dispersion and create trust that there is always someone who can help with difficult tasks.

Giving positive feedback

Another tactic the virtual team leaders used to foster the team members' identification with their team was giving them positive feedback. Team leader B in particular argued that feedback plays an important role in getting people to commit themselves to the team. She stated too that she tries to remind the team of what they have already accomplished whenever they have a bigger meeting, so that the feeling of incompleteness does not dominate the working climate.

B1: feedback plays a really big part in committing oneself to the team. So that you do feel that you are appreciated and you are getting feedback, also constructive feedback, and somebody is noticing what I do and what I say and how I participate in this team. If you get a feeling that it doesn't matter at all what I do, nobody notices anyway, that doesn't foster commitment. And also the results motivate you to commit yourself more and more, if it can be clearly seen that the team accomplishes things, and doesn't only discuss and make plans, and never gets anything done. That won't commit you.

The role of positive feedback appeared also in Team B's conference calls. The team leader used the tactic for example when two of the team members had told the rest of the team how one of the team's projects had fared (verbatim):

B1: Yeah, very good. Thank you already for the progress you've made and I was really happy and surprised, and also [Name] was really happy to hear that it's already implemented in Denmark. So well done, and keep up the good work.

Another point in the same call conference where the team leader B gave positive feedback was at the end of the meeting, when she wanted to inform the team about the praise the team had got from outsiders:

B1: Then just for your information, we had a third party audit, [code of the audit] on Tuesday here in Finland, and the auditor went through our HR and processes and he was extremely satisfied and impressed by our processes and the way we measure them, and also the improvement activities that we have. So good news. Perfect quality work [gives a laugh] done so far.

Team leader A gave positive feedback to the team in team meetings through videoconferences, where the whole team was present. It was typical that the team's sales were reported each month in the team meeting:

A1: Then our sales. . . here is our profit for September, the team's sales were 109 kiloeuros, so it is the fourth best [profit] this year.

Leader A emphasized sales issues in team meetings as it was a good way to give positive feedback of the work done in the team. When one of the team member's came late to the meeting, the team leader repeated the sales figure for him:

A1: So for A2's information. . . the profit percent from last month was 31.5
A2: Oh!

The role of feedback came across also in other team leaders' communication with their team. When the team works in a virtual environment, such as an electronic discussion forum, the relevant positive feedback might have an even greater role in team identification, because the messages are saved in the forum and can be read and reread months later. Hence, the characteristics of the technology, such as electronic memory, may in fact facilitate virtual team members' identification with the team (see Chidambaram and Bostrom 1997). Here is an example of team leader D's discussion forum message where the leader gives positive feedback (what follows is exactly as was written):

Web development March 2003
07.03.2003 – 09:44:36

D1: Hello! Here is attached the document where you can find the web development which is going on at this month. As you see, lot of countries are doing a good work updating the sites.

In a discussion forum or a team meeting, the team leader's praise is also more public than in a one-to-one situation, and this may enhance other team members' identification with the team as well. This might be especially critical in virtual teams, where the team members cannot see each other very often because of the geographical distance, and the successes of the team may remain unnoticed. It is however important that the leader is fair in giving the plaudits and expresses them in a manner which boosts the whole team. The team leader might create the feeling of success with just one sentence, as in this example from a team B call conference:

B1: HR system, B5 and B7, please share the good news.

Bringing out common goals and workings

The third identification-promoting tactic, bringing out common goals and workings, seemed to be an important factor in creating team identity in two of the virtual teams. In team C, the leader talked much about the importance of the common goals and the way in which

the virtual team members would all stand together when dealing with other organizational groups or units:

C1: We show a united front outwardly and towards those using our tools, and we don't criticize our team's work or the tools we have developed in public, although we might recognize any deficiencies internally, and think that something isn't as good as it should be, but we stand behind our own products, behind our work, good or bad, so that it's our internal task to sort out what's wrong and strive to be better, and so on.

Team leader B stressed the importance of showing the team members that she has the same interests as they have and that she is in the same boat with them. She also saw fairness in sharing as important:

B1: I have had a kind of participative style from the start . . . sometimes of course you have to take another kind of attitude, but usually I try to be one of the group, and I wouldn't demand from others anything I wouldn't demand from myself, and the other way around, I do the same things as I expect others to do. So I try to be fair.

There had been a reorganisation in team B's company at the time their virtual team was established two years ago. However, former ways of working were sometimes still evident, and due to the virtual nature of the team the team leader saw it as a challenge to keep the team always in line:

B1: . . . in the beginning you could see and hear a lot of such as "in [Country] we do it this way", and then you had to say, no, we [the team B] do it this way, we work as one function and the decisions are now made like this. And nowadays you don't see that much. We have of course co-operated a long time now, but we also have quite many common models and agreements, and when we didn't have them in the beginning, then we had to handle every situation on its own, and then we easily slid into the old [ways of working]. So in my opinion there is a better harmony [in the team] now and we work better as one unit than in the beginning.

In the call conferences of team B the leader still sometimes had to remind the team members of the present goals and ways of working (verbatim):

B1: Yeah, I wanted, you know, take this issue up, because I think it concerns all of us. And . . . how we could make it work. How could we . . . make sure that the PD managers, they don't just . . . ignore the process and go for the local HRM to ask for interviews or OPQs. That's all of our responsibility.

It was especially the leaders B and C who seemed to emphasize the importance of virtual team cohesion and unity of the goals. However, team leader D also stressed the fact that as leader of a virtual team his responsibilities include keeping all the team members from various countries together, belonging to the same "family":

D1: I see it as my responsibility, when some of the countries are going in different directions, and that is my responsibility, that the people there belong to the same [Company name]-family as the rest of the countries.

This kind of metaphor, seeing company as a family, can be seen as an example of rhetorical action in which the team leader links the individual and the organization as described in Cheney's (1983) study. Team leader D's striving to get the whole team to go in the same direction can also be seen in a message he sent to the discussion forum after a team meeting (what follows is exactly as was written):

Results and material from the webmeeting

31.10.2003 – 12:46:22

D1: Hello! Thanks for the meeting for all of you who were was able to participate. Hope you had nice trip back home. For my point of view we had a good meeting. I think that we now have clearer targets and the common understating of communication and co-operation. I summarise according my notices what we decided and planned for the next year. [...]

In addition, team leader D directed the team members' attention towards the common goals, when a sudden organizational change emerged. He stressed the importance of updating the company websites, which was one of the main responsibilities of the team D: (what follows is exactly as was written):

New owner

10.09.2003 – 15:04:43

D1: As you know, we have now the new owner. As long as we will have our own brand, we do not need to worry. Customers are seeking information about our future and our situation. We have to provide this information, so please translate all the information we [the parent organization] are making to [www.\[company\].com](http://www.[company].com) and put to your sites. [...] This is very important. So please make time for doing this. I will help you as much as possible. [...]

Talking up the team activities and face-to-face meetings

The fourth tactic by which the virtual team leaders enhanced the identification of the team members was talking up the team activities and face-to-face meetings. The team leaders A and B especially mentioned different kinds of trainings as an integral part of their team's work. Team leader B mentioned that she tries to figure out every now and then something new for the team members so that they get a chance to do something they have not done before. In both teams, there had also been different kinds of training and team activities to get the virtual team to function in its present form and to work together towards common goals. As leaders A and B stated:

A1: Last time in this [name of the training] we created a vision [for the team] for the next three years, which is kind of funny, because of organizational changes, that you do it three years forward, but ... we for example set down how many certificates and what kind of projects and know-how we would have and these kinds of development goals.

B1: At the beginning of the year we had a two day training course here in Finland, when we made plans for changing our way of working, and now we should start to carry them out during the spring.

The team leaders C and D also considered different kinds of team meetings and team-building activities useful in creating a team spirit and a feeling of belonging to the team. In virtual teams, these kinds of meetings were seen as especially important, because strengthening team spirit was seen as more difficult using only electronic means:

D1: [In a meeting] the team members are focused on the subject, but if they read e-mail, they might pass it over like a stack of papers, and the phone rings and so on, it just blows totally over, or they are kind of alone when receiving

the message, but now [in a meeting] when they are all there and if one of them is supporting me, someone who is committed to this, he will get the others along as well.

In team leader D's opinion virtual team identification can be maintained by computer-mediated communication once face-to-face activities to build up the team spirit have taken place. Team leader C was of the same mind, as can be seen from an instant messaging discussion she had with one of the team members after a face-to-face meeting with the whole virtual team:

C4: [...] Did the foreigners leave already?

C1: yeah, they all left already yesterday

C4: It was good to meet them for once there was a chance for it.

C1: yes, and I think that especially the people from [Country] now feel more a part of some bigger group, and the communication is easier when you have met everybody personally.

C4: Yes indeed, in future you will have at least some kind of clue what kind of people you are communicating with, I think it'll help in handling things in future.

C1: yes, and talking through the common issues – if only at this creation level – it also removes prejudices against what we are doing.

Virtual team leaders also referred in their team communication to the benefits and activities provided by the company, such as training courses. In the case of team A, it was on the agenda of team meetings that team members should share their experiences with the others if they had been on a company-sponsored training course:

A1: Then we have used to comment on the training courses you've been on, I don't know if this is the only one, this [Name of the training course] at the moment. A11 is the only one present, who has been on this course.

A11: Yeah, what about it?

A1: Yes, tell us how it was. What did you learn and...?

By stressing company-sponsored training to the virtual team members, the team leader can strengthen their team identification, as membership of the team becomes a value in itself.

These four identification-promoting tactics, catering for the individual, giving positive feedback, bringing out common goals and workings and talking up the team activities and face-to-face meetings, were the most frequent tactics found from the virtual team leaders' interviews and observations. Next, I will turn to the role of technology in virtual team identification and the challenges that organizational changes bring to leaders trying to bolster identification.

The role of technology in team identification

As all four teams used communication technology for their cooperation and three of the teams had members from different countries, the role of the technology was an integral part of team identification. By supplying the virtual team members with different kinds of communication tools the team leaders gave the team members opportunities to take part in discussions and decision-making, also from afar. It is especially the different kinds of

group communication technologies, such as the electronic discussion forum or audio- or videoconferencing tools, which provide the users with a “place”, where they can meet others and discuss things together. Before the implementation of the discussion forum in team D, the team leader pondered the importance of this kind of tool in prompting the team members to discuss things:

D1: It surely helps, because you attend better there and you see that these people are talking with each other and those are talking with each other and I might have something to say as well, whereas with e-mail you attend willy-nilly and it is useless to dangle anyone on the cc-list, if the issue doesn't concern them

Asynchronous tools give the chance to reread positive, identification strengthening messages and bring back issues which have been handled some time before, and synchronous communication technologies enable real-time discussions that can enhance team spirit and the feeling of togetherness. As team leader C argued, communication tools can be used also for informal, relational communication:

C1: then this kind of creating team spirit, that we do also technically, which isn't always so approved of by all the employers, but we send different kinds of funny e-mails especially on Fridays and we joke and make wisecracks through e-mail or chat. And in team meetings, which are usually conference calls, [—] most of these meetings are really informal, we banter at the beginning and in the middle. . . and so on.

At the same time, the technology may have another kind of role in identification with the virtual team. If the technology is implemented in a team where the members see the use of technology as an intrinsic value, the use of different kinds of tools may itself strengthen members' identification with the team. As leaders D and C stated:

D1: I think it is kind of cool in this web-world, that you use those tools. . . it is quite natural and fast and easy and cheaper than travelling and scheduling and it takes a lot more time to arrange these face-to-face meetings, so it has a big relevance, and I think it has also this kind of psychological relevance as well that especially this new tool [the discussion forum], it has this kind of feeling that we are a Webteam and we use this kind of group tool, [—] so it kind of. . . creates a change in attitude, when you use it yourself.

C1: If you actually tried to replace totally personal dealings with technology, then it wouldn't be a good thing, but when you are talking about people who create applications and systems, that's their daily work, I would see it [using technology in work] as quite natural. . . only positive.

In technically-oriented teams, which many of the virtual teams are, the technology itself can be the issue, around which the team identity is constructed.

Moreover, the nature of particular technologies seemed to strengthen identification with the team, as the virtual team leader used a certain kind of language with the members when using particular tools. The instant messaging system especially enhanced team C's own language, which was full of abbreviations and slang. By using this kind of language, the team leader created together with the team members a feeling of coherence and shared identity.

Organizational change as a challenge for identification with the team

Virtual teams are often created at a time when and in organizational environments where changes easily occur. This sets a challenge to the team leader, as s/he may have to lead the team in a situation where the future of the team might be insecure. Most of the team leaders also raised this problem up as it related to the virtual team members' identification with the team. Team leader A observed:

A1: as I was saying about these organizational changes, we have had them quite often and quite big ones and folks have been shaken up [—] and the nature of this unit is that there are different professionals working. . . so we don't become a kind of tight community. . . And then there are these people who have been ten years in the house and experienced just about eight organizational changes, so they may wonder why they are trying anymore, after a year everything will be changed anyway

This might be the reason why team leader A used the identification-promoting strategies less than the other team leaders in the study. Team leader A also said that the team members' incentive to get to know each other was not as high as it might be due to continuous changes – organizational changes were taking place normally once a year.

A1: it may be that people would have more motivation just to get to know each other, if they thought that for the next ten years they were going to be here. Also if we had known a year ago that this is where we are going to be for at least the next two years, but everybody assumed that we would be here only one year.

The continuous change also affected the way the virtual team leaders could articulate the team's goals to the members. Team leader C argued:

C1: We have developed the team structure over the last two years and it has changed, we have had a pressure for change, it [the team] has grown all the time, so in that way it has also been impossible to make anything constant, like what our goals are

As well-defined orientation and goals can facilitate virtual team members' identification with the team, organizational changes challenge team leaders' abilities to maintain such identification. However, team leader B also emphasized that a radical change is necessary in the beginning, when forming a virtual team, in order to make the new way of working clear to everybody and to start to create the new team identity:

B1: when this kind of change from a local to a global [team] happens, it is really important in the first stage that there is a clearly designated person, who takes charge, so that the reporting lines are clear, that you report to this one person from day one. [—] The ways you work from now on have to be really clear, and also the roles, because it helps to change the mindset. So it's better to make quite a radical change at one go, so then probably some kind of change will really occur, because if the change is just cosmetic, then probably nothing will change.

Discussion

In this article, I have focused on the identification-promoting strategies by which virtual team leaders attempt to strengthen their team members' identification with the team. In virtual teams identification with the team may be a more complex issue than in traditional teams, as the team members work together through communication technology while geographically separated from each other, sometimes even in different time zones. However, the findings were partially similar to those of a study where managerial identification strategies were investigated in traditional workplaces (Cheney 1983). Catering for the individual was seen as important in virtual teams, as was the expression of concern for the individual in Cheney's (1983) study. The remoteness of the team members raised this tactic to a yet more important role in virtual team leaders' opinions, as spatial and temporal distance may increase team members' feelings of detachment.

However, some of the tactics, such as 'talking up the face-to-face meetings and team activities', were found to be important in identification with the virtual teams, but were not found in traditional workplaces (Cheney 1983). It might be that these kinds of activities were important because people are not used to spending time and effort getting to know each other in work situations through computer-mediated means. They may also feel that existing communication technologies cannot enable a feeling of presence or opportunities to spend time together and get to know each other. If such tools were available, and more importantly, if virtual team members paid more attention to the social relationships through computer-mediated communication, face-to-face meetings would not necessarily be as crucial as they still seem to be for identification with the virtual team.

The virtual team leaders in this study each had quite a different kind of team to lead and they worked in distinct business sectors. In qualitative analysis the question of the "representativeness" of the data is irrelevant, because the subjects are not treated as a sample in the statistical sense (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, p. 163.). However, the need for team member identification with the team might have been different because of this in each case. One of the leaders had started as a leader only six months previously whereas the other team leaders had already worked with the team for a couple of years, and one of them was not sure whether the team would still exist the following year. This sets the team leaders at different starting points in terms of their chances of creating a shared team identity. It is a different matter to strengthen team members' identification with a team that has operated over a long rather than a short period. Besides, uncertainty as to the future can make it harder for virtual team leaders to promote identification with the team. This may explain some of the differences in the extent to which the different team leaders used identification-promoting tactics. In addition, the personal differences and preferences of the leaders may be related to the use of the tactics. For example, some of the leaders seemed to value face-to-face meetings over computer-mediated communication, which may explain the differences in talking up the team activities and face-to-face meetings.

However, other differences in the frequency of use of team leaders' tactics remain. Especially team leaders A and B differed from leaders C and D in their frequency of using the tactic 'catering for the individual' or in mentioning this tactic as important. This

difference might be explained by differences in the team structure. In teams C and D distinct subgroups had formed within the team, and the team leaders saw it as their responsibility to get individual, often remote team members included in the team. Catering for the individual might not have been as important in teams A and B, where the team was more equally dispersed and there were no totally isolated team members.

There was also a considerable difference between the team leaders in using the tactic 'bringing out common goals and workings'. For example, with the team A there seemed to be not so many shared goals in the team, or at least the leader did not stress them much in the interview or in the team meetings. This might be a consequence of the nature of the work done in the team, or the uncertainty the team was facing because of continuous organizational changes. However, team leader A did advocate company-sponsored training courses in the team meetings and raised such matters more than some other leaders. The explanation of the use of this identification-promoting tactic may lie in the character of the virtual team, which involved an emphasis on the personal development and the expertise of the members.

In teams B and C, the team leaders brought out many things related to the third identification-promoting tactic, bringing out common goals and workings. Both leaders stressed the equality of the team members and how they were on the members' side. This identification-promoting tactic could be observed also in team B's conference call meetings, but not so much in the actual messages team leader C shared with the team members via the instant messaging system. This may result from the nature of instant messaging as a communication tool. The messages were usually rather short, one-to-one exchanges dealing with small requests or questions. Common goals and workings did not come across as much in such exchanges as in the messages directed to the whole team or in team meetings. Nevertheless, in instant messaging it was common for the team members and the leader to use language full of abbreviations and slang, which was particularly typical of the team, and this in turn could enhance identification with the team.

It seemed that the tactic 'bringing out common goals and workings' was used more in situations where the virtual team leaders had to struggle to get the team to work in the same direction. These situations occurred especially because of organizational changes, and they were evident in the discussions and meetings of teams B and D. This kind of struggle may explain the differences in the frequency of the use of this tactic in virtual team leaders' actual communication. In the team meetings, team leader B occasionally had to remind the team of the present ways of working, as the team had faced an organizational change and some of the former ways of working were still evident. In the discussion forum of team D, the leader tried to get the whole team to go in the same direction by focusing on the team's goals, as a sudden organizational change had emerged.

Overall, this study showed that virtual team leaders use different kinds of tactics to strengthen identification with the team also from afar. Communication plays an important role in this process and communication technologies can be used as a tool to deliver the messages promoting identification, or as themselves a stimulus to identification in technically-oriented teams. However, it is essential to remember that this study did not investigate the experiences of the team members relating to identification with the team, and extensive conclusions cannot be drawn as to the efficiency of these kinds of strategies.

Therefore, it would be important to study also the team members' point of view with respect to identification with virtual teams in order to obtain information about how they see the role of the team leaders, technology and organizational changes in this process.

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Basic information

Title and description of the work, how long the leader has led the team and worked for the organization

Team

Description of the team, the goals of the team, roles in the team

Team leading

Leading the team compared to leading traditional teams, the team leader's role in the virtual team, the team leader's responsibility, feedback issues

Communication

Communication frequency in the team, description of the team communication, decision-making in the team, disagreements in the team

Trust

Role of trust in virtual teamwork, experiences of trust in the team, the team's geographical dispersion and trust

Commitment to the team¹

The concept of commitment, the role of commitment to the team in virtual teamwork, experiences of commitment in the team, appearances of commitment in the team, factors related to commitment, strengthening commitment, communication and commitment, the team's geographical dispersion and commitment.

Team cohesion, togetherness, team spirit

The concept of team cohesion/togetherness/team spirit, the role of team cohesion in virtual teamwork, experiences of team cohesion, appearances of team cohesion in the team, factors related to cohesion in the team, strengthening cohesion in the team, communication and team cohesion, the team's geographical dispersion and cohesion

Satisfaction

Team leader's satisfaction with the position and job in the team, with the team members, with communication and with communication technologies in the team. Experiences of team members' satisfaction with the team

Communication technology

Communication technologies use in the team, the functions the technologies serve, the use of communication technology and team communication, communication with virtual team members compared to the communication with the team members in the same site

Time

The team age and communication, the permanence/impermanence of the team and communication

Other issues related to the subject**Background information**

Age, education

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Note

1. I decided to use the word 'commitment' in interviews, as it seemed to be more familiar to the respondents than the word 'identification'.

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